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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: U.S.-IRAN INITIATIVES, THE LESSONS OF
IRAQ, OMANI SUPPORT FOR DIALOGUE, ECHOES FROM ABU GHRAIB

1. State papers voiced strong support for proposed U.S.-Iran dialogue, along with concern about the possibility of military escalation. Private daily Al-Watan accuses the U.S. of insincerity for promising to hold U.S. troops accountable for alleged Iraqi massacres while failing to impose harsh sentences in the wake of Abu Ghraib. Extensive daily news coverage of U.S.-Iran relations reached a crescendo on June 2-3, with all papers reporting on the U.S. offer to talk with Tehran and Iran's response.

COVERAGE

2. June 1-3 headlines focused on the U.S. offer to talk with Iran, Omani support for that initiative, and Iran's response. Six editorial responses have appeared to date, four on June 2-3 alone (three, all locally generated, in the state daily, Oman; others carried syndicated columns). Fallout from Abu Ghraib continued to receive some attention, with a June 3, front-page "Times of Oman" headline proclaiming, "U.S. Dog Handler Escapes Jail" over AFP coverage and a same-day editorial in Arabic daily Al-Watan accusing President Bush of insincerity for vowing to hold U.S. troops accountable if they murdered Iraqi civilians, while slamming light verdicts, mischaracterized as acquittal, in the Abu Ghraib scandal.

BLOCK QUOTES: DIALOGUE WITH IRAN...

3. Government-owned Arabic daily "Oman" (circulation 38,000) gave a rare thumbs-up to a U.S. policy initiative in its June 2 editorial, "Dialogue Should Prevail":

"Political efforts at finding diplomatic solutions to the Iranian nuclear issue continue. Despite Iran's refusals of American conditions, U.S. readiness to dialogue alongside its European partners is to be considered a positive gesture. The Sultanate has expressed its approval through a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, calling the American move the right step towards building a bridge for dialogue to end the Iranian crisis. The world does not need more violence, especially not the Arab Gulf; this region has witnessed numerous conflicts within the last three decades. The West, Iran, and the international community are all invited to sit at the negotiating table and work on solutions for this dilemma. Dialogue is the best hope for real solutions. Iran should find a way to ensure its counterparts that its nuclear programs are peaceful in nature."

...WITH MUCH AT STAKE...

4. "Oman" took a more admonitory tone in an editorial by columnist Awadh Baquir on June 3, "Region on Edge":

"The war of words between Iran and America is strategic and to be expected in a crisis. However, there is much concern about the possibility that America might persuade Russia and China to transfer the Iranian dossier to the Security Council. There the issue might escalate to a dangerous level, beginning with economic sanctions and ending in a repeat of the Iraqi scenario. America must keep lessons from Iraq in mind when dealing with Iran. The question that arises is: will America take military action against Iran, as some Western media have suggested? Is this crisis really about the Iranian nuclear issue, or is it a pretext for a strategy to contain Iran as happened in the 80s under "double containment?" There needs to be a real political solution for the Iranian nuclear issue, one which gives Tehran the right to use that technology for peaceful means while also assuring the international community that such technology will never lead to anything else."

...AND THE SULTANATE'S SUPPORT

15. Also on June 3, Oman carried an unsigned editorial entitled, "Active and Far-Reaching Diplomacy":

"The Sultanate is always keen to support all sincere efforts toward achieving the interests of the countries and peoples of the region, along with the stability of the region. From the very beginning, the Sultanate has confirmed the importance and necessity of dialogue to solve differences with Iran's nuclear issues and has always and repeatedly expressed its support for negotiation, including direct negotiations between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. That is in light of the United States' active and influential role in this issue and in other world issues. The Sultanate has reconfirmed this position in light of the new developments."

BUT CONCERNS LINGER OVER U.S. ACTIONS

16. The privately owned Arabic daily "al-Watan" (circulation 42,000) reflected on Haditha and Abu Ghraib, asking "What Do They Mean by Morals?":

"Simultaneous with President Bush's announcement that the U.S. intended to confront any violation of morality and principles by its troops in Iraq, an American military court decided not to convict the soldiers who committed horrible acts in Abu Gharib prison. Therefore, what does the United States mean by morality? Is it a public relations game included in the psychological war to influence its opponents? Or is it a mere ploy by the Americans to improve their image as a country and present these crimes as individual acts? Sorrow and sadness increased with the discovery of a massacre in which American Marines stormed a village and shot children and women after an IED hit one of their units. Had the BBC not shown these images, would they confess their crimes? The truth is that the Americans are committing all these crimes to eliminate the Iraqis and to take revenge for the killing of their soldiers by the anonymous resistance."

STEWART